

THE LAGUNA COPPER-PLATE INSCRIPTION: A VALUABLE PHILIPPINE DOCUMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The dawn of human history in the Philippines can be considered as having started at least 40,000 years ago. But it is rather unfortunate that, until recently, Philippine written history was thought to begin less than 500 years ago, if we take it that the history of a country is understood to begin with the first established calendar-dated document originating in, referring to, and/or recovered within the boundaries of that country. General consensus has it that the dividing line between prehistory and history in the Philippines is the year 1521, when Antonio Pigafetta wrote his diary notes for the records of his captain Ferdinand Magellan, the European "discoverer" of the archipelago.

The Philippines' southern neighbour, Indonesia, can claim a much earlier history since its oldest documents, the Kutai inscriptions from East Kalimantan, are estimated to date from the 5th century AD. Indonesian inscriptions, written on stone or thin sheets of copper, have contributed very significantly to our understanding of the history of this region during the first millennium of our era.

However, this paper is about the Philippines, and I hope it will clearly indicate that Philippine history can be presumed to have started at least 600 years before the arrival of Magellan in 1521. This paper will deal with the discovery of a copper-plate inscription like those which have enriched Indonesian history so much. Let me briefly relate first how I got involved with this exciting discovery.

In January 1990, a crumpled, blackened, thin piece of metal was offered for sale to the National Museum in Manila, after previous efforts to sell it to the world of antiques had met with little interest. The attractive aspect of this 20 by 30 cm plate of copper¹ was the fact that it was fully covered on one side with an inscription in ten lines of finely written characters. Except for a damaged upper left corner the plate appeared to be in perfect condition and displayed little oxidation, aside from some vertical stripes on its right half which did not prevent the complete reading of the text.

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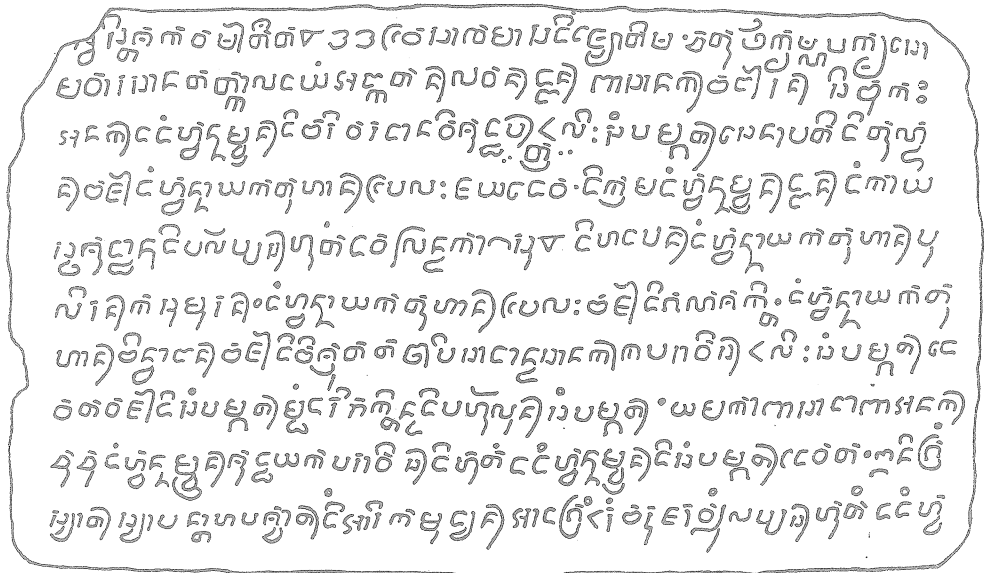


FIGURE 1: A TRACING OF THE LAGUNA COPPER-PLATE INSCRIPTION

As a long-time resident of the Philippines and a frequent visitor to the National Museum in Manila I am no stranger to its staff, and they know my interest in the old Baybayin Philippine script that is related to Indonesian Indic scripts. This script is still alive among the Mangyans, a community on Mindoro Island where I have my base.

When I was first shown this inscription at the National Museum I immediately thought that it must be from Indonesia, and nothing to do with the Philippines in a historical sense because no such inscription had ever been found before on Philippine soil. Moreover, it could also have been a fake. Nevertheless, I promised Alfredo Evangelista, Acting Director of the Museum, to have a look at it and to report on my findings. Since there was nobody in the Philippines I could ask for advice I wrote a letter to my friend Dr de Casparis, a well-known expert in Indonesian paleography, and sent him a copy of the provisional tracing I had made.

Since the copper plate had allegedly been discovered near the lake of Laguna de Bay, east of Manila, I decided to call it the Laguna Copper-Plate Inscription, or LCI for short.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE INSCRIPTION

The script appeared to me rather similar to the standard form of the Early Kawi script of the tenth century AD, as on the Old Javanese Randoesari inscription of Central Java dated to AD 905 (Stutterheim 1940) (Fig. 1). According to Dr de Casparis, this type of script was used from Bali in the east to Thailand and Champa (central Vietnam) in the west, since the scripts of these areas had not yet differentiated from each other at that

date. With the help of Holle's lists of Indonesian scripts (Holle 1882) I was able to identify most of the *akṣaras* (letters), notwithstanding the poor tracing I had made. After returning again to Manila I made some clear photographs of the inscription, which settled any previous doubts as to its correct reading. I continued contacting Dr de Casparis and he clarified several characters doubtful to me. The whole of the LCI has now been transcribed but the interpretation of certain parts of the text still remains difficult.

The Language of the Inscription

Regarding the language of the LCI there are a number of technical Sanskrit words, common in this type of inscription, and some Old Javanese words expressing honorific forms of address. However, the main language of the LCI is clearly Old Malay (henceforth OM), which contains several words that are identical with or closely related to the Old Tagalog language (henceforth OT) of the Philippines. Words with clear cognates in Tagalog (Old and/or Modern) in the LCI include *anak* (child), *dayang* (noblewoman), *hadapan* (in front), *hutang* (debt), *lap(p)as* (acquitted of debt), *ngaran*² (name), *pam(a)gat* (chief) and *tuhan* (honorable person). As a clarification, however, it should be said that several of these words are shared by Old Javanese as well. It should further be noted that the OM language underwent linguistic development over the centuries, so that languages of the famous Srivijaya inscriptions of the late 7th century and the several OM inscriptions of 9th century Central Java are not identical with that of the OM of the LCI, although they are certainly related (for the small number of OM inscriptions found so far see Boechari 1966; de Casparis 1950 and 1956; Coedès 1930).

The script of the LCI is well executed in a regular style. The *akṣaras* (letters) *ba* and *wa*, that are often mixed up, are here well distinguished, except in line 7, where *biśruta* is written instead of the usual Sanskrit *wiśruta*, and in line 8 where *warjādi* is given instead of *barjādi*³.

A curious writing error-cum-correction can be found in line 3, where the last part of a compound Sanskrit-derived Old Javanese word was accidentally omitted by the engraver. When he afterwards noticed his mistake he deftly inserted *tra* (of *patrā* = Sanskrit *patra*) under its intended position, and gave dotted indicators of his amended correction. Another error of omission, but without correction, is probably at *barjā* in line 4, where *barjādi* should have been written (see further below, and Appendix 1).

The Date of the LCI

It is fortunate that this type of inscription is generally supplied with a date so accurate that the exact year of issue can still be determined centuries afterwards. The LCI bears the Saka date of 822, or AD 900⁴, which dates it to the beginning of the reign of King Balitung of Central Java (without implying that the LCI necessarily originated from that area). In connection with the reign of King Balitung (AD 899-910), a great number of inscriptions on copper plates have been discovered, all in the OJ language. Most are royal charters or decrees and the majority bear the customary elaborated name of the king. However, in contradistinction to these characteristics, the LCI was not written in the OJ

language, was not a royal charter, and it does not mention the name of a king or any other name in the traditional formula.

The Contents of the LCI

The LCI seems to be a legal certificate of acquittal of a debt, perhaps incurred by a person in high office. The acquittal includes his whole family, all relatives and descendants. The debt involved a substantial amount of gold that apparently was still unpaid. Our "document" of acquittal (the LCI) was executed by, and in the presence of, certain leaders and officials of rank, some of whom are mentioned by name with their respective place (or area) of jurisdiction.

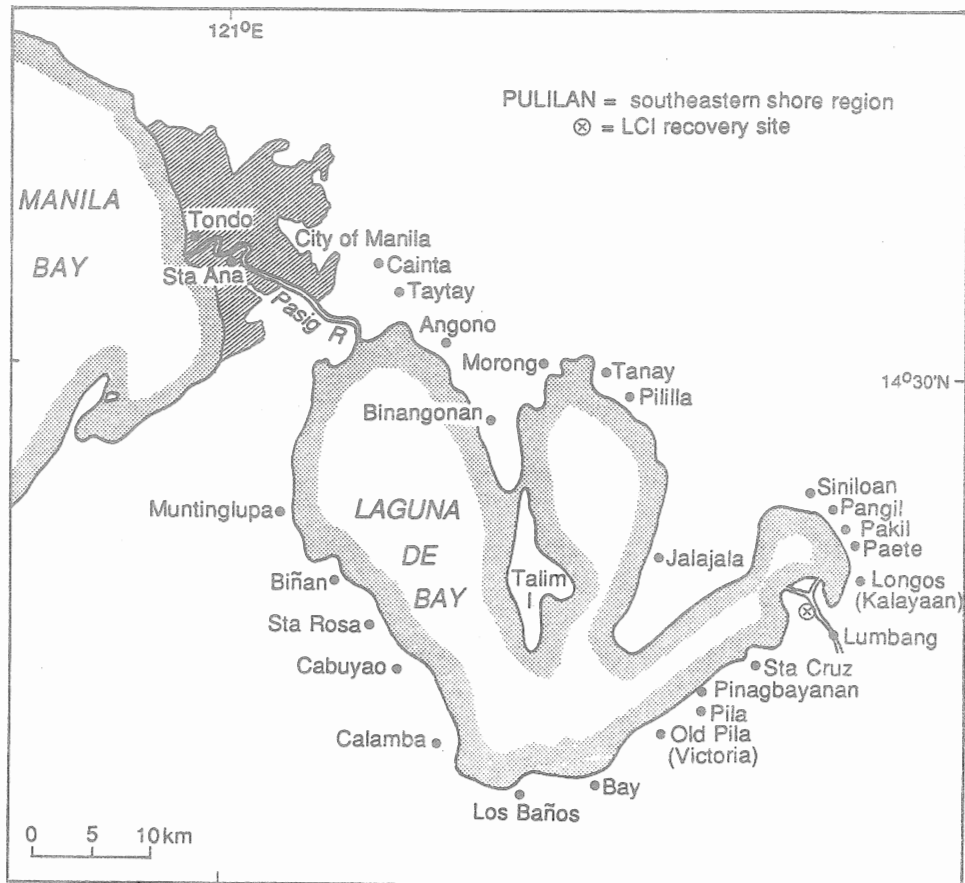


FIGURE 2: THE LAGUNA DE BAY AREA

The 10th or last line of the LCI seems to be a warning to anyone who might question the truth of the document. It is not uncommon to find a threat or curse of this type against

non-compliance or misbehaviour in similar inscriptions (Kern 1917, Vol. VII:27; de Casparis 1950:15-16). But the complete curse of the LCI may never be known for sure because this 10th line ends in mid-sentence, indicating that the full inscription ran to at least one more copper plate.

The Place of Origin of the LCI

It is regrettable that the LCI was not found during a controlled archeological excavation but rather during dredging of sand from the delta of the Lumbang River, which flows into the Laguna de Bay, in the Province of Laguna (Fig. 2). Reliable persons have testified to the truth of the LCI's discovery at this place. However, the alleged place of discovery and the area referred to in the text of the LCI, though both situated in the Philippines, are not precisely the same, as will be discussed further below.

Authenticity

An important aspect of the LCI that had to be established without a shadow of a doubt was its authenticity, especially bearing in mind the various fake "historical documents" that in the past have been presented in Philippine contexts. Fortunately, some of the foremost experts in the fields of paleography and Old Austronesian languages were readily available with their professional opinions. They assured me that the LCI is genuine and authentic, as based on the correctness of the script and the language(s) employed, both surely substantial elements that would be hard to imitate or falsify without detection by the experts.

Altogether, it was the opinion of these Indonesian and Dutch scholars that in an analysis of the contents of the LCI the Philippines would play an important role. In connection with this they gave credence to my theories regarding the locations of the toponyms or placenames mentioned in the LCI. These theories are presented below.

LANGUAGES AND PROBLEMS

The inscriptions in the Early Kawi script found in Indonesia are either in a local language like Old Balinese or Old Javanese, or in the more cosmopolitan Old Malay that was spoken in the kingdom of Srivijaya in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. These Indonesian languages acquired, in the course of their exposure to Indian culture, commerce and religion, a great number of Sanskrit loan words. They adapted these to their own linguistic needs and rules, equipping them with their own affixes and simplifying their spellings. However, certain standard legal and astronomical formulas or expressions in Sanskrit were presented unchanged, and regularly occur in these inscriptions. The LCI is no exception since it starts with a line in traditional Sanskrit astronomical terms that indicate its date in Saka years.

The main language of the LCI is OM, which served as the *lingua franca* of the whole Indo-Malaysian area during those times. It was probably understood widely in the Philippines as well, better perhaps than OJ, and this may be why OM was chosen as the language of the inscription. The LCI might therefore have been issued by recognised

authorities outside the Philippines (e.g. in Java) who had personal or national interests there. Perhaps important person(s) in the Philippines with a substantial debt in gold had appealed to these foreign authorities for help in the provision of a debt acquittal document, officially sanctioned, under certain conditions not mentioned in the LCI itself.

Another reason for the use of OM might have been because it was issued by Srivijayan authorities in southern Sumatra where OM was the vernacular. In that case, however, certain OJ words and influences, clearly noticeable in the LCI, would have to be explained. For instance, there are some pure OJ words, like *ngaran* (name) and *pam(a)gat* (leader or chief), that have no cognates in OM, and, moreover, do not occur in any OM inscription known so far. These words are accepted as OJ words, but they could be Old Tagalog as well because they exist in both of these languages. This brings up the question of Tagalog.

The Tagalog Angle

With the help of the Tagalog language more insight can be provided, especially since *ngaran* (OJ or OT?) is used with the OM prefix *bar-* (*ber-* in Modern Indonesian/Malay; *mag-* in Tagalog) in the LCI. In a fully OM inscription one would have expected *barnama* instead of *barngāran* (to name), because *nama* is the Sanskrit-derived word for "name" in Old and Modern Indonesian/Malay⁵.

Pamgat (or *pamagat*) is another OJ word that frequently occurs in OJ but not OM inscriptions, often preceded by the honorific OJ *sang* as in the LCI. On the other hand, those acquainted with the Tagalog language will recognize *pamagat* immediately as a Tagalog word as well, although at present mainly with the meaning of "title of a book", or "heading of a chapter". The oldest Tagalog dictionaries (San Jose(ph) 1609; San Buenaventura 1613) mention *pamagat* as a title or "special name" for persons.

It seems, moreover, that even at the beginning of this century *pamagat* was still used as a title for important persons, as evidenced in the book *Capitan Bensio* by G. B. Francisco (Maynila, 1907), where he mentions a *pamagat na maginoo* (p. 3) and *...isang Pangulong punong cawal, na may pamagat na Gobernador general* (p. 20). (I am grateful to Dr. Jean-Paul G. Potet, a French scholar of Tagalog, for drawing my attention to this publication).

The abbreviated forms *magat* and *gat* were still fashionable in the Philippines at the arrival of the Spaniards in the 16th century. Moreover, surnames like *Gatdula*, *Gatmaitan* and *Gatbonton* are reminders of once-existing titles for chiefs [*(pama)gat*] in charge of certain limited territories in the pre-Spanish Philippines. Likewise, a noblewoman, wife of a chief, was addressed in Tagalog by the title *dayang* (San Antonio 1738:#424, also in Blair and Robertson Vol. 40, p. 325). This word also occurs in the LCI.

Therefore, the word *pam(a)gat*, mentioned five times in the LCI, might well have been the common honorific reference to chiefs or important persons in the Philippines of the 10th century AD, borrowed from the OJ *pam(a)gat*, a common word also in that language at that time though not used anymore in Modern Javanese (see also Kern 1917, Vol. VII:51, where he refers to the Tagalog *pamagat*, *pamgat*).

PERSONAL AND PLACE NAMES IN THE LCI

A number of names, or possible names, of persons and/or places are mentioned in the LCI. Close attention should be paid to them because they might furnish vital clues regarding the political and topographic background of the inscription.

One of the personal names. Bukah, cannot be doubted because it is introduced by the OJ personal marker *si* (line 2), used identically in the Tagalog language as well. Other names without the *si* preceding them seem to be more in conformity with the style of OM inscriptions. These other possible personal names are Angkatan and Namwran (line 2), Jayadewa (line 4), Kasumuran (line 6), and perhaps also Gaṅaśakti (line 6) and Biśruta (line 7). Toponyms or placenames are Pailah⁶ (lines 4 and 6), Tuṅḍun (line 3), Puliran (line 6) and Binwangan (line 7). Dewata (line 8) and Mḍang (line 8) could be either personal names or toponyms.

The Austronesian (including Philippine) names in the above lists are Angkatan, Binwangan, Bukah, Kasumuran, Pailah, Puliran and perhaps Namwran. Names of Sanskrit origin are Biśruta, Dewata, Gaṅaśakti, Jayadewa (both the latter are compound words), Mḍang and Tuṅḍun. The last two, because of their lingual consonants (*ṅ* and *ḍ*) of Sanskrit origin, might originally have been toponyms in Java. Mḍang and Tuṅḍan (not Tuṅḍun!) do occur in OJ inscriptions earlier than the LCI (for Mḍang as a toponym see Stutterheim 1940:20). Javanese settlers in a foreign country such as the Philippines might have brought these names along and applied them to the places of their occupation in remembrance of their home country.

Regarding the names mentioned in the LCI, it is interesting to note that in the *Catalogo Alfabetico de Apellidos*, appended to a decree promulgated in 1849 by the Spanish Government in the Philippines⁷, the names Angcatan, Buca, Diwata, Pacla, Puriran, Somuran and Tundo are all mentioned as possible surnames!

THE ORIGIN OF THE LCI; LAGUNA DE BAY OR BULACAN PROVINCE?

The LCI was allegedly found in the Laguna de Bay area (Fig. 2). Therefore Pulilan, as the old name for the southeastern area of the lake according to some old Tagalog dictionaries (San Buenaventura 1613; Noceda and Sanlucar 1860; Laktaw 1914), might be considered to be the equivalent of the Puliran in the LCI. The *r/l* shift is a regular feature in Philippine linguistics (e.g.: *ngaran/ngalan*, name) and does not change the meaning. I personally was convinced of this equation at first, and also that the placename Pailah (lines 4 and 6) could have been the earlier name of Pila, Laguna. Moreover, scientific archeological excavations near Pila had indicated this area to be "one of the most important centers of trade, as well as of culture during the early part of the present millennium ..." (Tenazas 1968:13).

However, one of the problems is that the Pulilan of Laguna de Bay, according to the above-mentioned dictionaries, constituted a region of several villages, including Pila. The LCI clearly indicates that Pulilan and Pailah were two separate localities, each with its own leader. For this reason it is probable that the town of Pila in Laguna Province is not the LCI Pailah

However, it seems that Pulilan was a popular town name in the early Philippines because there is another in Bulacan Province. This Pulilan, which is located on the Angat River in Bulacan Province north of Manila (Fig. 3), is a better candidate. In addition, after carefully studying a map of Bulacan Province I found a village called Paila near the headwaters of the same river, in the Barangay of San Lorenzo in the eastern part of the Municipality of Norzagaray.

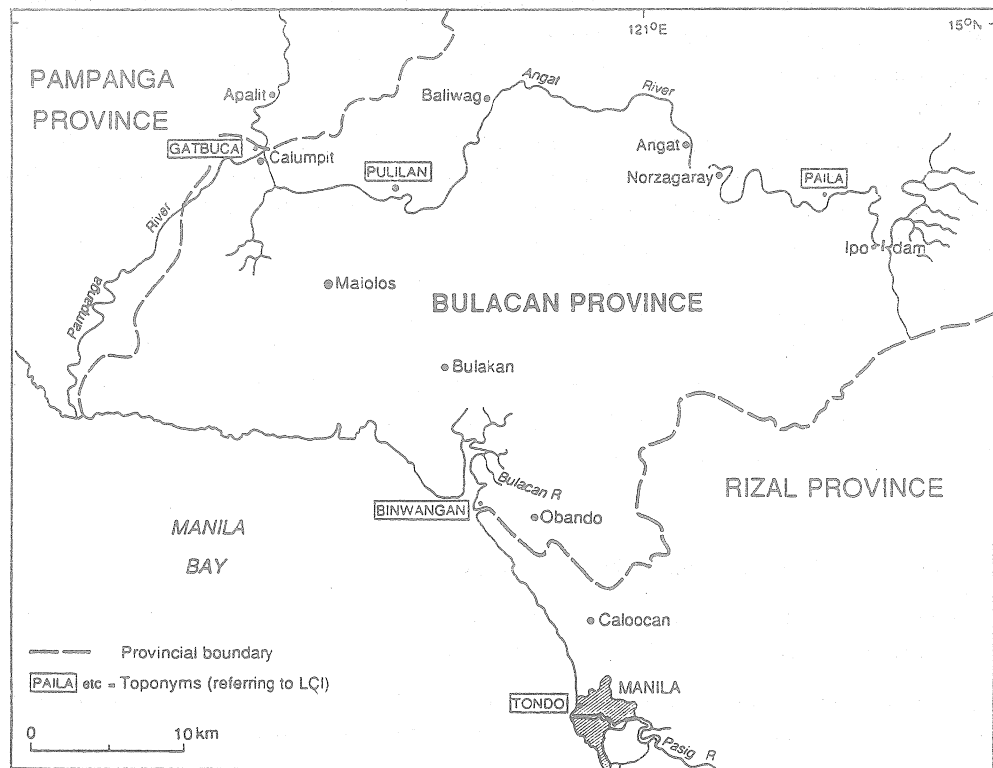


FIGURE 3: MAP OF BULACAN PROVINCE WITH SUGGESTED LCI TOPONYMS

Moreover, along Manila Bay, north of Manila and Tondo, is located the village of Binwangan at the mouth of the Bulacan River in the Municipality of Obando. One can further find, as an unexpected bonus, the village of Gatbuca north of the town of Calumpit on the Pampanga River. This may refer to the name Bukah in line 2 of the LCI (Isagani Medina: pers. comm.). All this encouraged me to consider the northern Manila district of Tondo, in earlier times a separate town situated at the mouth of the Pasig River, as the synonym of the name Tundun in line 3 of the LCI.

At this point I am confident that, by having shown that five of the placenames mentioned in the LCI have modern equivalents in Bulacan Province, the text of the LCI

can reasonably be considered to refer to the 10th century antecedents of these places. Therefore, the problem of whether or not the LCI was really found in the Philippines becomes insignificant.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE LCI

The Laguna Copper-plate Inscription (LCI) can be considered the oldest calendar-dated Philippine "document" in existence, predating indeed the Pigafetta account by some 620 years. It also implies that the Philippines, or part of them, under whatever name, can now take a rightful place on the 10th century map of Southeast Asia in the presence of the kingdoms of Srivijaya (Sumatra), Mataram (Java), Angkor (Kampuchea) and Champa (Vietnam).

I believe that in the light of this new historical evidence for an organized polity in Bulacan Province all previous pre-Spanish historical data pertaining to the Philippines will have to be re-examined and re-evaluated. For example, the 13th century Chinese account by Chau Ju-Kua (Hirth and Rockhill 1911) mentions a place called P'u-li-lu, and another Chinese record of the 14th century (Scott 1984:73) mentions Ma-li-lu, which Scott believes might have been Manila. I wonder if P'u-li-lu could have been identical with the Puliran of the LCI? However, this paper is only an initial presentation, bound to be preliminary and imperfect in its analysis, but certainly sufficient to whet the curiosity and interests of historians of the Philippines and Southeast Asia, as well as paleographers, linguists and sociologists of these areas.

NOTES

1 Laboratory analysis has identified the plate as copper.

2 In the transcription further below, I write the initial "ng" as an "n" to distinguish it from the "ng" formed by the final *anusvara* dot. This distinction is not applied here.

3 *Sādānda* in line 7 could be read as *sādānya* with identical meaning, but if so it probably would have been written as *sādāña*, as in line 8. *Sādānda* is therefore more probable.

4 I am grateful to Dr de Casparis for correcting my previous erroneous reading of Saka 844 or AD 922, as shown by Holle.

5 For the repeated *namaṇḍa* (his/her/their name) in OM inscriptions see Boechari 1966 and de Casparis 1950:61-2.

6 "Ai" is written in the LCI with the diphtong script-character for "ay" or "ai".

7 This decree, issued under Narciso Claveria y Zaldúa, Governor and Captain General, lists all existing Philippine family names that could be collected, enlarged with other "names", e.g. from flora and fauna, in order to make them available to those Filipinos who had been advised to adopt another surname.

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APPENDIX 1: A TRANSCRIPTION OF THE LCI

- 1) swasti śaka warṣātīta 822 waisākha māsa ding jyotiṣa . caturthi kṛṣṇapakṣa so-
- 2) mawāra¹ sāna tatkāla dayang aṅkatan lawan dhanña sānak barnāran si bukaḥ
- 3) anakda dang² hwan namwran dibari waradāna wiśuddhapātra uliḥ sang pamgat senāpati di tunḍu-
- 4) n barjā³ dang hwan nāyaka tuhān⁴ pailaḥ jayadewa . dikrama dang hwan namwran dñan dang kāya-
- 5) stha śuddhānu diparlāppas⁵ hutangda walānda⁶ kā i su⁷ dihadapan dang hwan nāyaka tuhān pu-
- 6) liran kasumuran . dang hwan nāyaka tuhān pailaḥ barjādi gaṇaśakti . dang hwan nāyaka tu-
- 7) hān binwānan barjādi biśruta tathāpi sādānda sānak kaparāwis uliḥ sang pamgat de-
- 8) wata barjādi sang pamgat mḍang dari bhaktinda diparhulon sang pamgat . ya makāña sādāña anak
- 9) cucu dang hwan namwran śuddha ya kaparāwis dihutangda dang hwan namwran di sang pamgat dewata . ini grang

10) syāt syāpantāha paścāt ding āri kamudyan āda grang urang baruvara wlung lappas hutangda dang hwa ...⁸

NOTES (APPENDIX 1)

1 The 2nd day of the 7-day week. OJ inscriptions usually mention the days of the 5- and 6-day weeks as well. OM ones do not.

2 *dang*, *sang* and *hwan* are honorific particles that, except for *hwan*, occur regularly in OJ and/or OM inscriptions. However, *hwan* has not been found yet in any such inscriptions so could it be OT?

3 *barjā*, as suggested by de Casparis, should be read as *barjādi* (to become, represent, delegate) as in lines 6, 7 and 8. It is probably an error of the engraver.

4 *tuhān* is related to OJ *tuha* (old, the elder), and to *tua* of Malay and Kapampangan with the same meaning. Here it means a leader.

5 *lapas* in OT has the same meaning as OM in the expression found in the *Vocabulario* of San Buenaventura. For instance, *lapas na ang utang ko sa iyo* (my debt to you has now been dissolved, or acquitted).

6 *Watānda* (or *welānda*?) might be related to Javanese *balanja* or *blanja* (salary, living-expenses), tentatively translated here as "salary-related". Its exact meaning is not known.

7 *kā* is an abbreviation of *kāti*, and *su* of *suwama*. Both words signify certain weights of gold.

8 From here the text continues on a second plate which unfortunately has not been recovered.

APPENDIX 2: TENTATIVE TRANSLATION

- 1) Hail! In the Saka-year 822, the month of March-April, according to the astronomer the 4th day of the dark half of the moon¹, on
- 2) Monday. At that time, Lady Angkatan together with her relative, Bukah by name,
- 3) a son/daughter, the honorable Namwran was given, as a special favor, a document of full acquittal by the chief and commander² of Tundun
- 4) representing the leader of Pailah, Jayadewa³. This means that the honorable Namwran, through the Honorable Scribe⁴
- 5) was cleared and acquitted of a salary-related debt of 1 *kati* and 8 *suwama*⁵ in the presence of His Honor the Leader of Puliran,
- 6) Kasumuran; His Honor the Leader of Pailah, representing Ganasakti; (and) His Honor the Leader
- 7) of Binwangan, representing Bisruta. And, with his whole family, on orders from the Chief of Dewata,
- 8) representing the Chief of Mdang, because of his loyalty as a subject (slave?)⁶ of the Chief, therefore all the descendants
- 9) of the honorable Namwran have been cleared of the whole debt that His Honor owed the Chief of Dewata. This (document) is (issued) in case

10) there is someone, whosoever, some time in the future, who will state that the debt is not yet acquitted to the honorable ...⁷

NOTES (APPENDIX 2)

1 Or the 4th day of the waning moon counted from the day of the full moon.

2 The chief of Tundun seems to have had a higher position than the others because he was additionally a commander (*senāpati*).

3 Although the name is Sanskrit, meaning "divine (or royal) victory", this doesn't necessarily mean that this person was a foreigner. A preference for foreign names was as much a fashion in former times as it is today. See further line 6, Gaṇaśakti ("host of power"), and line 7, Biśruta ("famous").

4 Official clerks were usually employed for important documentary transactions.

5 One *kāti* is about 617.6 grams, and one *suvaṃṣa* (the 16th part of a *kāti*) is about 38.6 grams. The total weight of gold that had to be paid was 1.5 *kāti*, or approximately 926.4 grams.

6 OJ *hulun* means "slave" and also "being subordinate, subservient". It might be that Namwran had technically become a slave because of his debt, together with his family and descendants.

7 The name that follows is probably Namwran. This last line might be part of a curse formula in which transgressors are threatened with punishment, here or in the hereafter.